



Submission on proposed curriculum on Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics

March 31st 2016

Introduction

Educate Together welcomes and supports the introduction of a state curriculum in Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics. We would like to thank the NCCA for their request for an official submission and for their comprehensive consultation process, encompassing all stakeholders in Primary Education.

Educate Together's submission is a result of a consultation with teachers as well as input from National Office staff.

Educate Together's Learn Together Ethical Education curriculum, which includes a strand on Belief Systems, is currently being taught in 77 Irish primary schools. In 2012, Educate Together commissioned a review and evaluation of the curriculum by the School of Education in DCU. The team found that the curriculum was '*highly regarded in Educate Together schools*' (pg 24) and '*for a document almost then a decade old, respondents were... very positive about its continued relevance*' (pg 10). With over 1,000 teaching professionals involved in the delivery of this curriculum and over 21,000 children actively involved in discovery and learning around Ethical Education, Educate Together has a wealth of experience in the area.

Educate Together would like to make clear, from the outset, its willingness to share with the NCCA both its experience of developing and delivering an Ethical Education curriculum and all or any relevant resources.

Educate Together
11 - 12 Hogan Place
Dublin 2, Ireland

T +353 1 4292500
F +353 1 4292502
E info@educatetogether.ie
www.educatetogether.ie

Directors 2015 - 2016

M. Baskarasubramanian, S. Bradshaw, R. Cochran,
J. Cummins, M. Gordon, D. Mac Aonghusa (Chair),
P. Murphy, M. O'Rourke, A. Vargens, M. von Richter

Charity No. CHY 11816
Company No. 286202

Overview of proposed curriculum on ERB and Ethics

A curriculum on Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics has merit and value in its own right. However, this is not clearly stated in the proposed curriculum. It is disappointing that a curriculum on ERB and Ethics would be viewed as a response to Ireland being a '*pluralist, multi-ethnic and multi-religious society*' (Encountering Children in a Curriculum for Education about Religions and Beliefs and Ethics: pg 13). Likewise, it is unfortunate that it would be seen in the context of ameliorating '*tensions*' which '*can occur*' (Consultation Paper pg 21). While these may certainly be additional benefits to studying ERB and Ethics, children should be exposed to such a curriculum regardless of changes in Irish society.

It is also regrettable that the NCCA documents related to this curriculum fail to acknowledge that a specific ERB and Ethics curriculum (although it was not named as such) has had a foothold in primary education in Ireland for almost 40 years. We would question the validity of the statements below which ignore the ground-breaking work of Professor Áine Hyland, Dr Carmel Mulcahy and others in introducing World Religions and Ethical Education into Irish schools and developing programmes in these areas since the 1970s.

'The development of a curriculum in Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics breaks new ground in the Irish education system'.
(Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics in the Primary School: Consultation Paper Concluding remarks: pg 33)

'The introduction of the curriculum is a new development for the Irish education system...' (Encountering Children in a Curriculum for Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics - A review: Concluding remarks pg 24)

We would respectfully ask that in all future documentation the phrase 'state curriculum' be included in any statement related to the innovative nature of the proposed ERB and Ethics curriculum.

Learning about / Learning from religion

In 'An Overview of Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics content in Patrons' Programmes', it is stated that:

'It would seem from examining the two approaches to ERB above, Learn Together is an enquiry-based approach to learning 'about' religions and beliefs while the GMGY programme is closer to an exploration of personal beliefs which can be described as learning 'from' religion and beliefs.' (pg 33)

Educate Together questions the basis for this analysis, and the NCCA's role in effectively passing judgement on the Learn Together Ethical Education curriculum in this way. Definitions of learning *about* and *from* religion(s) are contested, and it is not possible to judge which approach is either intended or practiced without close analysis of classroom practice (Teece 2010). Since the NCCA has not researched practice in Educate Together schools, it seems inappropriate to comment on the approach taken. We would, however, welcome such research, should the NCCA or the DES wish to fund such a study, which could provide valuable learning in the development of a state ERB and Ethics curriculum.

In 'Encountering Children in a Curriculum for Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics - A review' it is stated that "*'Education about' could be construed as cold dissection of the content rather than an inquiry-based, sociocultural exploration of the subject matter that will ultimately enrich the lives of children, as is proposed by this paper.*" (pg 16) This document goes on to argue that *'when done poorly, teaching about religion can lead to a very shallow learning, positioning the learner outside the learning experience...'* (pg 17)

We would argue that the assumption that a Religious Education curriculum must adopt either a 'from' or an 'about' approach, both approaches being viewed as mutually exclusive, is problematic. Such a false distinction precludes an approach that may be more information-driven at younger classes but more inquiry-based in older classes. Added to which, it can be argued that *'when done poorly'*, any subject matter, be it religion or otherwise, results in *'very shallow learning'*.

Vision and Aims

Educate Together welcomes the stated aspiration that the proposed curriculum '*will help foster a sense of identity and belonging in children by developing their self-awareness, self-confidence, self-esteem and, ultimately, their happiness.*' (Consultation Paper pg 10)

Aims such as enabling children to '*reflect within and beyond themselves about the precious nature of human existence and the importance of inner well-being*' (Consultation Paper pg 13) and to '*develop a critical knowledge, understanding and awareness of human rights, equality, culture, social justice and social inclusivity*' (Consultation Paper pg 14) are also commendable.

Links with the highly-regarded Aistear programme are highlighted in the Consultation Paper (pg 17) and the identification of such connections is very helpful.

Introduction of programme

The consultation paper argues (pg 22) that '*discrete ERB teaching may be more appropriate from the middle to the senior end of primary schools when children's sense of identity and belonging have been established.*' Educate Together has been involved in Religious Education for nearly 40 years and this has not been our experience. We have found that younger children are capable of looking at religious customs and practices with both interest and respect. When children are exposed to difference at a young age, there is an indisputably greater chance that this difference will be normalised and there is no evidence to show that such an exposure has a role to play in undermining a personal sense of identity.

Emphasis on ERB

It is disappointing that religion, which is already such a defining feature of Irish education, continues to dominate discussion around a state curriculum.

Ethics is clearly emerging as the component of less significance or value in the proposed curriculum. Not only is Ethics granted two strands to ERB's three, one of the approaches outlined under curriculum development

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specifically suggests that while the '*ERB component of the curriculum remain as a distinct specification....Ethics may be best situated within or across curriculum areas*' (pg 31 Consultation Paper).

We would dispute this. Ethics is a hugely important subject in its own right and it is deeply concerning that the NCCA would consider it worthy of integration, an effective death knell to any new subject.

Atheist / Agnostic / Humanist Philosophical Lifestance

Those of differing philosophical viewpoints, be they atheist, agnostic or humanist, are effectively side-lined in the relevant documents. The term 'non-religious' is used throughout, denoting deviance from a perceived religious norm. The terms 'non-theistic' and 'secular' are also used. The difference between 'secular' and 'non-religious' is unstated. We would recommend use of the terms 'atheist / agnostic / humanist' instead.

We would also recommend the inclusion of the term 'non-theistic', and its application to beliefs such as Buddhism, in the documentation glossary.

In the Consultation Paper (pg 24) a direct reference is made to '*children's own previous knowledge and experience (including their own experience of religious practice or the absence of religion from their lives).*' The phrase '*absence of religion*' has negative connotations and once again denotes deviance from a perceived religious norm.

The invisibility of atheist, agnostic and humanist groups is also apparent in a number of other sections of the Consultation Paper. A direct quotation from the Primary School Curriculum (1998) is used which refers to '*the diversity of beliefs, values and aspirations of all religious and cultural groups*' (pg 20). It is later argued that a child's experience is '*shaped by a unique combination of conditions which include, among others, family dynamics, relationships, cultural norms, societal expectations and religious customs*' (pg 21) while elsewhere it is stated that learning environments '*provide a support for the positive self-image of all children irrespective of their ethnicity, culture or religion.*' (pg 11). References to culture and / or cultural norms or groups do not necessarily denote or encompass beliefs of an atheist, humanist or agnostic persuasion.

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One of the aims outlined under *Spiritual Awareness* specifically links spirituality with religious belief, espousing, as it does, a development of *'curiosity and questioning so that her/his own views on and ideas about religious and spiritual matters can be developed and consolidated'*. (Consultation Paper pg 14) Spirituality and religion should not be linked in this way nor should the NCCA, a state body, have any role in promoting their consolidation.

Likewise, a specific aim of the ERB curriculum is that children would *'discuss and reflect upon the key questions of meaning and truth'* (Consultation Paper pg 14). Use of terms like 'meaning' and 'truth' in such a sweeping, unattributed manner is deeply unsettling in a state curriculum. Children, instead, should be encouraged to reflect upon their own interpretation of both.

There is also mention of a *"natural connectedness between ERB content and the strand of 'Foundations of Religions - Major World Religions' at Junior Cycle"* (Consultation Paper pg 18). This course has been criticised by atheist and humanist organisations for its overtly Christian outlook and its antagonistic attitude towards atheism, humanism and agnosticism. It is unfortunate that the new ERB and Ethics curriculum would seek to make these connections. Instead, we would suggest the following:

"The state curriculum in ERB and Ethics will help to prepare students for the study of various subjects at second-level, which may include CSPE and Religion. It is envisioned that these subjects will be reviewed in due course to ensure that there is a clear link between them and the newly developed ERB and Ethics state curriculum."

This makes a connection between the learning at primary and second-level without implying that the state curriculum for ERB and Ethics has been modelled on, or is intended to be, similar to the (problematic) Junior Certificate Religion curriculum.

Role of Teacher

Some concern has been expressed about the role of the teacher in the delivery of this curriculum. In our experience teachers, as professionals, are capable of setting aside personal beliefs and convictions when exploring world religions. This has been borne out by the results of a survey of teachers in our sector in relation to the ERB and Ethics curriculum. When asked if the Belief Systems strand of the Learn Together had ever proved a difficulty or challenge due to personal convictions, respondents reported that this had never been the case. Examples of responses below:

'No, I am a Catholic and as an Educate Together teacher this has never interfered with my teaching of other religions.'

'I am Agnostic, although this differs to the teaching of the many religious beliefs I teach, it has never been a difficulty for me as I believe that every child should learn and understand about the many religious/non-religious beliefs that make up our society'

'I have a strong faith in God. I am baptised a Catholic but not practising. I have really enjoyed teaching the belief systems strand as I have learned so much from it.'

Atheist. No, the beliefs systems strand has never proved a difficulty for me

'I am a practicing Catholic which is why I wanted to teach in an Educate Together school! The fundamental pillar of Catholicism is to treat others as you would like to be treated. This has not yet posed any difficulties to me.'

'I am a Roman Catholic and love teaching Belief Systems and all LT programme.'

'I am a Buddhist and I have never had a difficulty with this.'

CPD on ERB and Ethics

Respondents to the above survey highlighted the importance of CPD on the proposed new curriculum, be that inservice either in-school or off-site. One respondent commented on the fact that CPD facilitators should, themselves, come from and represent a range of diverse backgrounds while another stressed the importance of training for those chosen to be facilitators. Online resources and summer courses were mentioned as were specific courses and resources on humanism and atheism to properly reflect the diversity of Irish society. One respondent particularly recommended the modelling of lessons and approaches to help engender confidence in teachers unused to such a curriculum.

It was also mentioned that the delivery of the curriculum should be standardised throughout the country in spite of differences in community or school profile.

The homogenous nature of teacher education was highlighted, with one respondent describing teaching as a *'white, middle-class, denominational profession'* while another commented that there was *'no diversity within teaching'* and that teachers needed to *'learn about faiths as much as the children'*. Input into the Colleges of Education from diverse groups, such as the Immigrant Council of Ireland was recommended.

Language

Educate Together recognises that the proposed curriculum is in draft format and that the consultation process is on-going. With this in mind, the points below have been highlighted in the spirit of co-operation, in the hope that the proposed curriculum will be finalised in the not-too-distant future and implemented in schools thereafter.

- In the consultation paper, there is mention of the ERB and Ethics being *'for a pluralist and values-based education'* (pg 10). There should be clarity on the issue of whose or what values are at stake here. In the same document, it is hoped that *'children will share ideas about the world, promoting relationships and friendships with those of different belief backgrounds'* (pg 10). Inclusion of the word 'belief' assumes a

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religious perspective. The term 'backgrounds' is more inclusive in this context.

- Under '*How will this vision contribute to the lives of parents?*', the parent is viewed as an '*active participant in the educational process*'. The term 'active' may be understood in differing ways and this ambiguity needs to be addressed.
- One of the aims of the new curriculum is that children would '*use accurate language for human differences*'. The term 'accurate' is unusual in this context and we would recommend the term 'respectful' instead. It is also hoped that children would '*recognise unfairness, injustice and inequality*'. To 'recognise unfairness etc.' is a passive and insufficient aspiration. The curriculum should aspire towards children making a difference to the world around them and a more active verb is needed here.
- Under specific aims for the Ethics Curriculum, it is hoped that the children would be enabled to '*promote an active tolerance and respect across religious/cultural divides*' (pg 14). It is disappointing that the NCCA would aspire towards 'tolerance', be it active or otherwise. This is a weak and condescending attribute, encompassing, as it does, the nuance of a majority group grudgingly granting recognition, benefits or privileges to a minority.
- It is also hoped that children would '*investigate and think about topical spiritual, moral, social and cultural issues*' (pg 14). It is unclear as to why these issues need to be 'topical'. Issues which may or may not be in the news are worthy of investigation and reflection. In the same section, children are placed in the position of '*justifying and defending personal opinions and beliefs*'. It is not the school's or the state's role to place young children in the role of 'justifying and defending' personal beliefs. We would recommend, instead, that children be enabled to 'critically reflect upon' both their opinions and beliefs.

Implementation

Educate Together would favour the development of ERB and Ethics as a discrete curriculum. In doing so, we recognise that there will inevitably be an overlap with the Learn Together curriculum, which we feel can easily be negotiated. However, more specifics are needed as to how the proposed curriculum will be implemented and issues in relation to resources and CPD will need to be addressed.

The Toledo guidelines highlight the importance of teachers' knowledge, attitudes and pedagogical skills in ensuring that ERB is taught in a fair and balanced way (Toledo guidelines, p16). Teachers will therefore need considerable support and professional development to implement this curriculum.

Within this context, Educate Together would welcome the opportunity to provide both CPD for teachers and training for prospective facilitators or teacher educators, as well as the opportunity to share relevant resources.

We are aware that the introduction of the proposed curriculum as a discrete curriculum may well impact on an already packed and pressurised school day and are open to discussion as to how this can be ameliorated.

Conclusion

Educate Together schools have been delivering an Ethical Education curriculum encompassing Ethics and ERB very similar to that currently being proposed for almost 40 years. As leaders in Ethical Education, we are happy to share our experience with the NCCA and to support the development and implementation of the proposed curriculum in any way possible.

We wholeheartedly welcome this initiative.

References

Teece (2010), Is it learning about and from religions, religion or religious education? And is it any wonder some teachers don't get it?, *British Journal of Religious Education*, 32:2, 93-103

Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools (2007) OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights

McNamara et al (2012) *The Learn Together Curriculum in 2012: fit for purpose?* Dublin City University

Educate Together

11 - 12 Hogan Place
Dublin 2, Ireland

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